

JUDITH & YAEI - RIGHTEOUS RADICALS PART I

by Rebbetzin Leah Kohn

With Chanukah upon us, Women in Judaism takes a brief look at Judith and the other heroic women associated with these days, who saved the Jewish people from enemy hands. Their clarity and remarkable commitment to Torah remain inspiring to this day. In addition, we begin a two-part exploration of Yael, whose heroism at an earlier time in history also ensured Jewish victory.

Judith & Yael: Righteous Radicals

Chanukah dates back to the era (165 BCE) when the Syrian Greeks controlled Jewish life in Israel. In an effort to extinguish the spiritual vitality of the Jews, the Greeks prohibited many important rituals - under threat of death - including the circumcision of Jewish babies. Our sages tell us that, nonetheless, the Jewish women had their babies circumcised. They also insisted that their men come out from hiding and wage war against the Greeks. In order to pressure their husbands and brothers into action, many women threw themselves and their babies from the walls of Jerusalem as if to say, "You will have neither children nor wives if you do not earn us the right to publicly observe what is holy to us." Inspired to action by the Jewish women, Matityahu and his five sons eventually rose up and saved the Jewish people, paving the way to the Chanukah miracles.

Another decree issued by the Greek kings was that upon marriage, a Jewish maiden was first to be brought to the local ruler. Judith was one of those summoned. Judith, "...the daughter of Yochanan Cohen Gadol was especially beautiful and the tyrant king desired her. She seemingly acquiesced, came before him and fed him cheese foods till he became thirsty. She gave him wine to drink till he became intoxicated and fell asleep, where upon she severed his head and brought it to Yerushalyim. When the Syrian soldiers saw that the king had perished, they fled."

Today's Jewish woman has an opportunity to commemorate the deeds of her foremothers who lived at the time of the Greek exile. On Chanukah, many women have the custom not to work during the thirty minutes that the Chanukiah's candles are obligated to burn. Resting in this way reminds us of how the Jews rested from their enemies, thanks in great part to Judith and her sisters in exile.

Turning now to the heroine, Yael, we see a similar commitment to Jewish values and an ability to harness her unique feminine strength, even in the face of danger. While Yael lived hundreds of years before Judith, both stories resound with the same timeless resources of the Jewish woman. Yael appears in The Book of Judges. One of its passages recounts how she single handedly kills Sisera,

general of the Canaanite army attacking her people:

"...Yael went out toward Sisera and... he turned aside to her to the tent...she opened a skin of milk, gave him to drink, and covered him.... Yael, wife of Heber, took a tent peg, placed a hammer in her hand, came to him stealthily, and drove the peg into his temple and it went through into the ground...and he died" (Judges: 4:17-21).

This event is again described in the "Song of Deborah," later in Judges. Deborah, a prophetess and leader of Israel at the time, praises God and all who had a share in assisting her victorious people. Of Yael, she says:

"Blessed by women is Yael, wife of Heber the Kenite; by women in the tent will she be blessed. He asked for water, she gave him milk; in a stately saucer she presented cream. She stretched her hand to the peg and her right hand to the laborers' hammer. She hammered Sisera, severed his head, smashed and pierced his temple" (Judges 5: 24-36).

The first sentence lets us know that Yael is blessed by "women in the tent" for her actions. "Tent" alludes to the modesty that is one of a Jewish woman's greatest assets. This image seems to contradict the violence that Yael exhibits in killing Sisera. Her action can certainly be called heroic, but it is hard to see it as modest. Why then do "women in the tent" - modest women - praise Yael as one of their own? Who are these women and why are they set forth as arbiters of Yael's modesty and righteousness?

The midrash tells us that the "women in the tent" are the Matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. The Torah text closely allies each woman with the image of a tent, which symbolizes her feminine modesty. In Genesis, Chapter 18:9, the angels ask Abraham, "Where is Sarah your wife?" He replies, "Behold! - in the tent!" Our commentators explain that, although she had guests, Sarah maintained a certain separation by remaining in her tent. With Rebecca, Genesis, Chapter 24:67 tells us that Isaac brings her into the tent of his mother. The Torah makes a point of mentioning this, because it reveals a certain inner quality about Rebecca. Similarly, Genesis 31:33 mentions the tents of Rachel and Leah, to imply that they are women of modesty. If Yael deserves to be praised for her modesty, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah are suitable women for this job.

Beyond being blessed by these female luminaries, one midrashic commentator states that Yael will be blessed even more than they. This interpretation is derived from the two separate ways one might translate the Hebrew preposition, "mem." One way is, "by," as translated above, "by women in the tents." The second way is, "more than," which makes the translation, "more than women in the tent." While commentaries bring down both translations, the second one is more problematic. The Book of Judges tells us that Yael "went out from her tent" to lure in Sisera. She did not remain modestly concealed inside. How can Yael be considered more modest or - blessed "more than" - her paradigmatic foremothers who literally stayed inside their tents?

Our next class will resolve this seeming contradiction.

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